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INTELLIGENCE OPERATIONS

US is beefing up its covert activities

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Washington

IN the late 1940s, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) provided funding for guerrilla fighters in China, Albania, and the Ukraine section of the Soviet Union. These operations — among the first covert actions by the agency — were but minor annoyances to their communist targets.

Forty years and much experience later, and half a world away, the United States is involved in "covert" operation, this one highly controversial. The country in question is Nicaragua; the US allies are an estimated 7,000 to 12,000 *contras* fighting their country's ruling Sandinista regime.

As covert actions go, this is a modest affair. But intelligence experts say that since there is no national consensus on overall US policy in Central America, aid to the *contras* has raised old questions about when and where secret action is justified.

It has also focused attention on the capabilities of US intelligence agencies, which are rebuilding after the budget and staff cuts of the mid-1970s. Covert action, after all, represents only a small fraction of what US intelligence does. Today, there is much debate among experts about the quality of the major portion of US intelligence work — research and analysis.

"There have been some successes, and some significant improvement in the quality of US intelligence," says a former military intelligence officer. But this source adds that there is still a tendency for reports to be too bland.

The US has long been ambivalent about the means required to produce good intelligence. There is something abo
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and moderate worker groups throughout West-
ern Europe to help keep the region from turning to communism. Paramilitary teams of partisans were dropped behind the Iron Curtain.

In the '50s, US envoy Kermit Roosevelt and a suitcase of money helped topple Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq, restoring the more pro-Western Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi to his throne. A somewhat gaudier campaign in 1954, including covert radio broadcasts and US-supplied warplanes, deposed Guatemalan head of state Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán (who had expropriated US corporate property).

Then came the Bay of Pigs. The US-backed partisan invasion of Fidel Castro's Cuba in 1961 was a military and propaganda flop.

By the mid 1970s, these and other operations had come back to haunt the CIA. A pair of congressional committees, angered by what they perceived as CIA abuse of power, proposed a number of reforms, most aimed at tightening control over the agency.

These committees considered a blanket ban on covert action. They backed off, however, after deciding the US did need a foreign policy tool in between mere speech and sending in the Marines. "We decided there were circumstances where you wanted to do it," says an academic source who was a staffer on one of the panels.

But the CIA, branded a "rogue elephant" by the public investigations, was not eager to rush back into undercover actions. When President Carter took office in 1977, he inherited "zero" covert actions, according to his director of Central Intelligence, Adm. Stansfield Turner.

President Carter and Admiral Turner eased the CIA back into secret operations. This process has continued under the Reagan administration and its agency director, William Casey. By most accounts, Mr. Casey is a director preoccupied with covert action. Under his direction the CIA proposed (but did not get) such an action against the small South American country of Suriname, intelligence sources say.

The largest "covert" operation currently being run by the US ("It is a little bizarre to be debating covert action in public," says former CIA director William Colby) is probably its

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